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THE LIFE OF TENNYSON.¹

ON the principle that a man's life may be estimated through his work, those who are familiar with the poetry of Lord Tennyson might have concluded that a monograph of fifty pages would have been biography enough for the poet. Consequently the voluminous memoir of more than a thousand pages compiled by his son must have aroused misgivings in the minds of some people. Surely, they might have said, there must have been united in Tennyson a gentle, lyrical Dr. Jeckyl and a hitherto undiscovered Mr. Hyde to make the man who wrote that poetry require this memoir. But when we search diligently through the somewhat chaotic pages for confirmation of this theory, we are both disappointed and relieved, for the volumes do not conflict at all with the testimony of the poetry. Of a truth this is a disappointing world. Just as we began to feel a sure foundation for belief in the disappearance of the old eulogistic biography there crops out in a most unexpected quarter one which, in some respects at least, leads all the rest. It has been said that the present Lord Tennyson wrote the memoir to prevent anybody else from doing so. If this be true, the work is a great success; for, from a materialistic point of view, there is certainly no chance for another biographer. Lord Tennyson has undoubtedly worked in all the incidents; and if the letters selected with the aid of Professor Sidgwick and the late Professor Palgrave are the best of the forty thousand, the discriminating public would hardly have appreciated the publication of the remaining thirty-nine thousand and odd hundreds.

But, of course, the memoir deserves more serious consideration. In spite of its faults of style, of manner, of method,

¹*Alfred, Lord Tennyson.* A memoir by his son. Two volumes. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1897.

it is, in a certain way, a very valuable contribution to literature. The student of Tennyson will find it a storehouse of materials, somewhat inharmoniously arranged and interspersed with a large amount of valueless matter. The volumes should have been labeled "Tennysonianana," with the sub-title "A Cyclopædia of Information about Lord Tennyson, His Life and Times, His Family, and His Work." It certainly should not be called a biography, though in the abrupt beginning of his preface the present Lord Tennyson implies that it is one. A biography should present the man. He should grow before the reader, as it were. When we finally close the book, it should be with a certain sense of intimacy with a personality whose life has been lived over for us. But in the memoir by his son Lord Tennyson's personality has, to quote an expression from Milton, found in one of the forty thousand letters, been so "diffused," whether "carelessly" or not, as to give us more than twelve basketfuls of fragments, but no adequate conception of the whole. One reads the preface of such a book as this with an interest based on the desire of learning the writer's point of approach. From it we expect to derive some insight into the methods and aims of what follows. But it is only after having read the biography itself that we can appreciate the preface in this instance. When we realize the disjointedness of the work we begin to understand the disjointed remarks the author makes in his own behalf. But it is in the preface, after all, that we get the clue to what makes the memoir valuable, for it contains as great a proportion of quotations from the poet as the book itself contains of letters and extracts of verse. The fact that these quotations, letters, unpublished poems, extracts from diaries, etc., are not put together in a very workmanlike way does not detract from their intrinsic value, and the memoir is a perfect mine of this sort of wealth. From the chronological list of the publications at the beginning to the index at the end, both of which are well executed, one who would study the art of the poet finds on nearly every page ample material. It is unfortunate that

this should be so interwoven with trivialties as to make it difficult of access. It is unfortunate, too, that it has been so arranged as to interfere with a true conception of the man Tennyson himself.

The quotations come early in the book, but no earlier than poesy seems to have come to Tennyson. At twelve he was writing a criticism of "Samson Agonistes" in the form of a letter to his aunt, and "an epic of six thousand lines à la Walter Scott." At fourteen he wrote, "in perfect meter," a drama in blank verse. Indeed, his boyhood is swallowed up in poetry, so far as the memoir goes, since of the thirty-two pages devoted to his life before he entered Trinity College (Cambridge) nine consist entirely of "Unpublished Poems of Boyhood," and by far the greater part of the rest deals with early poetic attempts, thus leaving little room for information about the child and the lad. In like manner the description of the three years spent at Cambridge is too hazy. The account of them is not human enough. What little mention of the man as distinguished from the poet is found in the pages devoted to this period is of the purely laudatory kind. But this is probably due, in part, to the destruction of Tennyson's letters to Arthur Hallam, by the latter's father. A casual reader might think that Tennyson is *posed* on all occasions. He seems to do nothing but write poetry and look handsome. At least, this is the testimony of his friends, which is all the testimony given us. The only characteristic indicated is an intense shyness. Then came the Pyrenean expedition, which illustrates a feature of the book that is simply exasperating. We are told unexpectedly and as abruptly as the preface begins that "during the summer" the poet started off for the Pyrenees with money for the insurgents in Spain. A letter from Charles Tennyson to John Frere implies that he got there, though it does not say so. It does say that he is abroad, however, and we leave him there while we read an account of the insurrection itself, after which we again find Tennyson at home, and are given ten more pages of unpublished poems. This sort of thing

pursues us all through the book. Just as we think we are about to know the man himself we have a lot of his poetry thrust at us. When we reach the fourth chapter the man has reached his majority, and henceforward is lost in the poet. He descends from Parnassus long enough to become engaged to a young lady, who makes her appearance as unexpectedly as the Pyrenean expedition, and who is destined to wait for him for more than ten years. During this time she seems to drop out of his life until the publication of "In Memoriam," in 1850, makes it pecuniarily possible for them to be married. This disappearance is, of course, due to the fact that Lord Tennyson destroyed his private letters of the period. For a time, as husband and father, he is depicted in a more human light—that is, the letters seem to do it—but this does not last, and as for Mrs. Tennyson, she very soon becomes merely another Tennyson, to receive more letters about the poet and the poet's work.

Since the book from this point degenerates more and more into a collection of letters and extracts, it is clear that we must give up considering it as a biography, and judge of it from its value as a crude mass of information to those who would make a study of the art of Tennyson. Viewed in this light, there are two important grounds for adverse criticism: first, in his selection of material in the shape of letters and extracts, the present Lord Tennyson has not been altogether judicious; and, secondly, he has not made the best use of his selections. He has lost consistency in quantity and sacrificed method to an obvious desire to "get in" certain letters, which seem to owe their importance more to the fact that they were written by or to certain important people than to any bearing they have on the poet or his art. It is undoubtedly of interest to know that Emerson liked this poem, John Ruskin that one, and that the Crown Princess of Prussia thought the "Idyls of the King" "really sublime;" but it was surely unnecessary to print the letters in which these people so expressed themselves, from address to superscription. This accounts, in a large measure, for the bulky nature of the mem-

oir. In like manner the reader frequently gets bewildered in a maze of extracts from diaries, which, for the most part, far from being of value or interest, seem utterly pointless. Mingled with the letters and extracts such as these are others which make some readers, at least, fairly gnash their teeth, for they allude to incidents of the poet's life which the biographer allows to remain mere allusions. There are, of course, many letters which afford much insight into the poet's modes of thought and work and even glimpses of his character, but it requires the threshing out of much straw to obtain them. Our author's method of putting his material together may be gathered from the following citations, taken entirely at random from the first volume:

1863.

In January my father wrote to Frederick Locker, sending at the same time a volume of his poems for his daughter Eleanor.

(Here follows the letter in full.)

On March 6th my father sent off his "*Welcome to Alexandra.*" *He would like to have seen* [sic] the pageant. . . .

After the arrival of the Princess of Wales in England, Lady Augusta Bruce wrote.

(Long letter from Lady Augusta about the "Welcome.")

In May the Queen asked my father what she could do for him.

Thus it goes on for page after page, but one has to read all, for fear of overlooking something of importance.

The appendix at the end of the first volume—consisting of reminiscences of the poet, his friends, and his work, by Aubrey De Vere and others—is by no means to be overlooked in summing up the merits of the volume.

The second volume is a sort of Tennyson year-book or calendar. It begins with 1864, the year of "Enoch Arden;" and if we had omitted to read the first volume, imagining that it had given us satisfactorily the growth of the poet and the development of his genius, it would doubtless prove a satisfactory conclusion.

The first chapter has for a motto an extract from a letter to Mrs. Tennyson, which recounts how Spedding said

"*Enoch Arden*" was the finest story he had ever heard, and better adapted for Alfred than for any other poet. With the usual abruptness and lack of sequence the chapter begins with the bold statement: "My father was always an enthusiast for Italian freedom." Then follows a long extract from Mrs. Tennyson's journal describing how Garibaldi planted a tree given to the poet by the Duchess of Sutherland. Garibaldi then kissed all the boys and departed, and "my father wrote to the Duke of Argyll." This chapter is, however, one of the best in the entire work, for it contains some very valuable notes by the poet on his methods of work, with copious illustrations of the meaning of different lines, all of which is of great interest. Possibly because we have learned what to expect, the second volume makes altogether a better impression than the first. The Queen's letters, some of the poet's criticisms on books, together with recollections by Jowett and Palgrave, are placed at the end.

To sum up the whole matter, it may be said that the world is indebted to the present Lord Tennyson for a great collection of materials, but that he who learns anything of the great poet's life and work from the memoir must do so through his own efforts brought to bear upon this material, and that the biographer's handling of his matter has not been such as to minimize these efforts. He has aimed rather at the decorative than the useful in the selection of his letters, and he has relied too much on his extracts telling their own story. This makes the work defective in homogeneity.

There are many things in the life of such a man as the late poet laureate that one would like to know, things that might add strength and meaning to the lessons taught by his poetry, and bring them home more fully to the minds and hearts of men. These are the things that should concern his biographer. They are worth more to the reader than many thousands of letters from other people, however distinguished. Having lived all his life with the poet, the present Lord Tennyson is just the person who might have made him live for us. That he has not done so seems due more to the desire

expressed in his preface of effacing himself than to anything else. This has led him to make his own comments and remarks too brief and curt. His method all the way through has been to make a simple statement and then rely on letters or extracts to substantiate it. In this way he has failed to produce that concrete image of the personality of his father which a biography should have given. It is as if a number of artists had collaborated in the details of an immense picture, but had failed to put their separate contributions into one coherent composition. At least, one of the reasons of his having done this has already been hinted at. It lies in the too evident desire to surround the poet with an atmosphere of familiarity with various personages. That this is a mistaken idea is beyond discussion. The poet laureate needs no gilded frame for his picture. If the princes, the poets, the great men of his time, had failed to appreciate him, the loss would have been theirs, not his. The effort to let other people tell his story accounts, too, for the numberless trivialties with which the volumes abound.

But whatever shortcomings the volumes given us may have, they will take their place, and no mean place, in the literary history of England. Future generations of students will feel a debt of gratitude to their author for having put together so much that is of value, and in the mean time no one can fail to admire the simple yet dignified way in which he has endeavored to discharge with all reverence what was to him a filial duty. Of the poet himself it must be said that he has in no wise suffered at the hands of his biographer, although he has not gained all that one could have hoped. Every impression that we have received of him from the memoir, whether it be of the man or the poet, is, indeed, one of truth and trustfulness, of high purpose, of sympathy.

W. H. MCKELLAR.